

Cameron continues EU negotiations amid deepening inner-party divisions

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On Friday, UK Prime Minister David Cameron met with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in Brussels to continue discussions over the terms of the UK's membership of the European Union (EU).

According to media reports, the European Commission would be prepared to offer Cameron a new “emergency brake” for the UK to ban migrants from within the EU from claiming working family tax credits and child benefit for up to four years.

In response, John Redwood, a leading Eurosceptic in Cameron's Conservative Party, said the proposal was “an insult to the United Kingdom. It's not a serious offer. We need to take back control of our borders and we need to be able to control our own welfare system. That falls well short of that.”

This week, 40 Conservative MPs wrote to Cameron calling for a meeting to discuss their concerns that he is not asking for sufficiently radical changes in return for Britain's continued membership of the European Union. They want him to restore Britain's “sovereignty” over setting tax rates and laws.

The MPs were said privately to be backed by 10 government ministers and aides.

One Eurosceptic told the *Daily Telegraph* Cameron was doing “significant harm” to party unity after the referendum on British membership of the EU, due before the end of 2017.

John Baron, the MP who organised the letter, said that Eurosceptic MPs have been seeking a meeting with Cameron since November, without success. The prime minister's “refusal to engage” with 40 of his MPs “who signed my letter last November requesting a meeting to discuss our concerns—signals No 10 has no intention of pitching for a ‘fundamental change’ in our relationship with the EU,” he wrote in the *Telegraph*.

The letter complains that getting an exemption for the UK from the principle of “ever-closer union” in the EU is

not enough and that Parliament must be given a veto over EU laws. The *Telegraph* cites one member of the government “who supported the letter but could not sign it,” i.e., a minister, stating, “We are supposed to be debating whether Britain goes down a path as an EU member in which national sovereignty would increasingly become a thing of the past, whatever anyone says. There is no evidence that Cameron is going to come up with anything like the guarantees we need that this won't happen.”

Reports from the *Sunday Times* indicate that Cameron is moving towards a position whereby Britain would withdraw to the periphery of the EU, a so-called “outer circle”, thereby opting out of key binding EU laws.

Speaking to the press, Cameron said, “The British people want to see a stronger role for national parliaments and an acceptance that the ever-closer union is not the aim of all.”

This position appears to have the support of Germany under Chancellor Angela Merkel, because it leaves her free to work with France on consolidating a “core Europe”. But it is an agreement that places the UK and Germany as opposed poles of attraction, with Cameron clearly desirous of forming alliances with various Eastern European states to block against Berlin and Paris. It also comes with various demands attached that Cameron will have great difficulty selling to his Eurosceptic wing, particularly his support for plans to create a European army.

Cameron's initiative is being headed by Nick Herbert, who 15 years ago led the campaign to keep Britain out of the eurozone currency union. He worked closely with the campaign director for “Vote Leave”, Dominic Cummings.

Internal warfare is now barely concealed. Media reports detail how at a recent cabinet meeting, Chris Grayling, the leader of the Commons, called for ministers to meet the

day that Cameron returns from EU negotiations in Brussels. One Eurosceptic told reporters, “They want to declare victory on the Friday and dominate the media while everyone in the cabinet has to sit on their hands. They know there’s a 72-hour window where voters decide whether this deal flies or not.”

A source close to the prime minister described Eurosceptic suggestions of “secret deals” with the EU and individual EU states as “an interesting conspiracy theory”.

Cameron wants concessions that will enable his government to deepen the attack on welfare and workers’ rights. Cameron will no doubt now try to change domestic law to clarify the British parliament as sovereign and that British courts are not bound by Europe’s charter of fundamental rights.

The *Sunday Times* described such a move to placate the anti-European right as “The icing on the cake”, or as one of several “rabbits” he will pull out of his hat. The “emergency brake” proposal would be one such rabbit.

Oliver Letwin, Cameron’s policy guru, has contacted Conservative lawyers asking them for ideas after Sir Jeremy Heywood, the cabinet secretary, blocked a succession of Tory proposals.

After weeks of pontificating about how certain core EU rules and regulations were beyond negotiation, recent media reports suggest Germany has offered Cameron a compromise over his demand for EU migrants to face a four-year ban from claiming in-work benefits in the UK. The deal suggested by Berlin will not discriminate against EU migrant workers employed in the UK because it will remove benefits from both EU and British workers!

Benefits would only be available to those who have earned over a certain figure and therefore paid enough tax to qualify for in-work benefits. It will mean taking away in-work benefits from millions of the poorest workers.

UK and EU citizens working in the UK who earn only the minimum wage would all be denied welfare benefits. This would effectively signal the end of in-work benefits, which are targeted for the poorly paid.

Giving his enthusiastic backing for the proposals, Juncker expressed his confidence that the renewed negotiations will be able to come to agreement at the February 18 summit of EU leaders: “I’m quite sure that we’ll have a deal, not a compromise, a solution ... a permanent solution in February”, he said.

The *Sunday Times* suggested that Cameron’s manoeuvres are particularly aimed at neutralising opposition from the party’s “big beasts” such as Justice

Secretary Michael Gove and London Mayor Boris Johnson, a probable contender for the party leadership.

Interviewed in the *Sunday Times* last year, Johnson called for changes to the 1972 European Communities Act to make clear that Parliament overrides European law. Now Cameron has instructed Gove to design a scenario similar to the status of the German constitutional courts, which also rejects the primacy of the European court.

A senior Conservative told the media “By getting Michael to deliver the key rabbit you bind him and Boris in to the PM’s camp.”

There is no guarantee that this will work and every possibility that it will backfire.

In any event, Cameron has again allowed the Eurosceptics to dictate events and thereby increased the likelihood of a Brexit vote in any referendum. Two opinion polls published this month suggest an increasing number of British voters wish to leave the EU.

A poll for the right-wing *Mail on Sunday* found 53 percent of people supporting withdrawal and 47 percent expressing a sentiment to remain within the European Union. The *Independent on Sunday*, which advances itself as more liberal, also showed a narrow lead for exiting the EU, 40 percent to 38 percent, with 22 percent undecided.

The right-wing *Daily Express* reported a survey by the Edelman Trust, which conversely found that support for staying in the EU had in fact risen from 40 percent in 2014 to 48 percent this year. However, the report noted a widespread social disparity, with 47 percent of low-income households earning under £15,000 a year supporting leaving the EU, compared with 61 percent support for the EU among more prosperous layers of what are termed the “informed publics.”



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